

Abstract

Gender Inequality in the Arts, is a research based installation project that aims to explore the ways women have been excluded from the art world historically and uncover achievements made by women in art that have gone unnoticed or remain hidden due to the lack of inclusion. While women are gaining more representation each year in the art world, this group still faces many obstacles that male artists don't have to face. The research component of this project gives an overview of the historical lack of inclusion of women in art. It also addresses some achievements made by women that have been downplayed by historical records and are recently coming to light. The physical project and installation serves as a visual representation of this research and aims to start a meaningful conversation with the viewer about this pervasive topic.

Gender Inequality in the Arts

Research

Who is your favorite female artist? This question may be easy to answer today, but just a few, short decades ago, women artists weren't even included in art history textbooks. "How could there have been any great women artists if art historians failed to acknowledge any women artists at all" (Clark 6)? Women have historically been excluded from the art world and are still facing underrepresentation and inequality today. "From the 16–19th centuries, women were barred from studying the nude model, which formed the basis for academic training and representation" (National Museum of Women in the Arts). This lack of opportunity for women to become artists also influenced the downplay of women's achievements in art throughout history. According to Marsha Meskimmon, Professor of Modern and Contemporary Art History and Theory, "over the past thirty years, a substantial body of literature on the topic of women-artists' and their work has demonstrated clearly that women have played a significant role in the production of visual art for centuries" (1). While women's work has proved to be important to art history, there are many stories of women artists that have been hidden or unrecognized. Some of these stories, I have been able to research and uncover, but many will remain secret due to the lack of inclusion of, and opportunity for, women artists in written history.

One way that women artists have been excluded from art history is the lack of representation in published art history texts. "The first edition of H.W. Janson's *History of Art*—the 572-page textbook long referenced in many art history survey courses—includes no women artists ... It was published in 1962, and women artists wouldn't appear on the pages of later editions until 1987" (Gotthardt). While women artists are mentioned in art history texts today,

the number of women mentioned is still disproportionately low to the number of male artists mentioned. “Notably, the ratio of the number of women artists to men artists mentioned, is much higher for the 1990s and 2000s books than it was for Janson, Gombrich, and Gardner of the pre-1974 period. This ratio averaged about 9.75 women artists for every 100 men artists mentioned in the recent books, as compared to the average ratio of .22 women for every 100 men mentioned in the earlier texts” (Clark 8). The lack of representation for women artists could be impacting the number of women who seek full-time employment as artists. “It seems certain that their appearance in all history texts is necessary to their achievement of such esteem and an even more necessary condition for the inspiration of women who will be the great artists of the future” (Clark 12). In an article written by Dr. Helen Gørrill, an artist, writer, and editor, she discusses the masculine canon in fine art education and insists that women artists should at least be introduced to students, especially since the majority of art students are female. “The new research presented here suggests that both students and lecturers feel there are still not enough female role models presented within art history and contextual studies seminars and exposed to their mainly female student cohort” (Gørrill 31).

Even for art history educators who are conscious of including women in their teaching, there is a debate happening about how to integrate women artists into the discussion. In an article by Georgia C. Collins and Renee Sandell, the affects of using gender distinctions is addressed. “In the past, gender distinctions have been used as pretexts for devaluing and neglecting women’s art” (Collins 12). The article continues “after all, we call artists who happen to be men, quite simply, ‘artists,’ so shouldn’t we refrain from placing artists who happen to be women into some diminished subcategory called ‘women artists’ ” (Collins 12)? While this argument is

compelling, the article goes on to explain why gender should be addressed. “We cannot and should not avoid explicit references to gender as we introduce women's art into our classroom teaching. To avoid the issue of gender would falsify the context in which women artists have worked, distort the full significance of their achievements, and leave unchallenged many ‘natural’ assumptions about the purpose and value of art which were established under conditions of male dominance and bias” (Collins 12). Incorporating women artists into art education will encourage the interest of female students by providing them with same-sex role models and could increase a sense a pride and self-esteem (Collins 13). While art educators are becoming increasingly aware of the underrepresentation of women artists, ways of addressing this problem are still being debated.

The lack of representation for women in art history texts and education could be impacting the number of women employed as artists. “Female art students outnumber men, yet despite their greater numbers doctoral research evidences that artwork made by women artists is far less likely to achieve success through economic or symbolic valuation, with women’s art achieving up to 80 percent less than men’s in auction sales, alongside disproportionate and tokenistic museum representation” (Gørrill 23). More women than men are attending art school, but more men than women are employed artists (National Museum of Women in the Arts). Women earn 70% of Bachelors of Fine Arts, yet only 46% of women are working artists in the United States (National Museum of Women in the Arts). Women are also less likely to hold leadership positions, which can impact the lack of representation for women. Diana L. Miller, from the Department of Sociology of the University of Toronto states “On average, women are perceived as less competent and less authoritative than men” (124). According to The National

Museum of Women in the Arts, “women make up a majority of professional art museum staff but despite recent gains, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions.”

In some artistic fields, women are gaining representation but still lack equality in pay and leadership positions. While less women are working artists, there are more women reported than men working in design fields in 2019 according to the AIGA Design Census. This Design Census is performed each year and is a great way to gain a deeper understanding of individuals working in design professions. “A total of 9,429 people participated in the Design Census this year.”

“More women than ever are in the design workforce, as are non-binary designers—though unfortunately this data set is still too small to be statistically significant” (Design Census). The census also reports “Men are more likely than other genders to make more than \$150,000 a year. This tracks with national data that shows women hold just 11% of leadership positions in the design industry and make 80 cents on the dollar compared to their male counterparts.” While more women are reported to be employed as designers, women still make significantly less than men and hold a small fraction of the leadership positions.

Another possible reason for the disproportionate number of female to male artists could be the impact of societal gender roles that have been present in our society for centuries. An example of a gender role associated with women is to be the child bearer and nurturer. This responsibility that is placed on women could dramatically impact the career paths women choose to pursue. “Unsurprisingly, many historically successful women artists deliberately avoided bearing and raising children because of the toll it would take on their art” (Miller 122). These assumed female roles extend beyond child bearing and into other areas of “domesticity.”

According to Miller, “Women have historically been discouraged from developing a single

competency in depth, as moderate competence in multiple areas was considered more suitable for women who needed skills in multiple domestic tasks. The freedom to focus on a single skill, was reserved for men” (121). Not having the ability to fully develop a single skill, such as painting, could have impacted the number of women who have succeeded as artists historically. Miller also states that “the structure of artistic careers, like the structure of bureaucratic workplaces, also conflicts with child care and domestic responsibilities” (122). Because women are given these gender roles, the ability to pursue an artistic career and also fulfill these domestic responsibilities may feel impossible. “Notably, life histories of influential women artists often emphasize how their atypical life circumstances facilitated their success; many significant women artists had indulgent parents who allowed their daughters to receive artistic instruction or were childless and therefore had the freedom to pursue the arts” (Miller 121). Tyler Cowen, from the Department of Economics of George Mason University expands on the idea of women succeeding in art because of parents who provided artistic instruction. “Until the nineteenth century, nearly all prominent women painters had artist fathers” (Cowen 97). He goes on to explain historically, when women could not receive artistic training from family, no training was available (Cowen 97). Sending females to study with a male teacher was not considered socially acceptable and was rarely done (Cowen 98). “In one exceptional case, Artemisia Gentileschi, arguably the most talented female Renaissance painter, was sent to an outside male teacher. She was not only raped, but when she brought the case to trial, she was tortured with thumbscrews in an attempt to ascertain the truth of the matter” (Cowen 98).

Women artists have also been excluded from the art world due to feminine artwork being viewed as “craft” instead of “fine art.” Gouma-Peterson and Mathews state that “a large part of

traditional female creative output that conveyed a female experience had been invalidated as art and relegated to the category of 'craft' through the creation of an aesthetic hierarchy qualitatively differentiating 'high' from 'low' art" (332). Fibers art is historically a feminine art form that has been deemed as craft. When Anni Albers, famous today for her innovations in weaving, was admitted into the Bauhaus in 1922, she was told by the school's founder, Walter Gropius, "it is not advisable, in our experience that women work in the heavy craft areas such as carpentry . . . For this reason, a women's section has been formed . . . which works particularly with textiles; bookbinding and pottery also accept women" (Kassia). This gendered view of different artistic media is still prevalent today. Another aspect of women's work being viewed as low art comes from evaluative bias. Miller reports "unfortunately for women artists, perception and evaluation are structured by gender" (124). "Women are generally evaluated less favorably than men across multiple domains of social life" (Miller 124). She goes on to explain how subjectivity for evaluating artwork impacts women artists (Miller). "Evaluative bias is particularly problematic for women artists because aesthetic quality is inherently ambiguous" (Miller 124). "There are no definitive standards for what makes 'good' art, literature, film, or music" (Miller 124).

Because of the exclusion of women from art history, many of the achievements made by women artists are hidden and will remain secret. However, some of these achievements are well-documented. Through my research, I found that many of these achievements made by women were radical for the time and were presented through a negative light or are just now gaining recognition.

Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun was a very successful portraitist from Europe (Locker). In an article, published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it is reported that she was born in 1755

in Paris to a portraitist names Louise Vigée and his wife Jeanne Maissin (Locker 118). Once her father began to discover her artistic talents “at seven or eight,” she started receiving drawing lessons from her father (Locker 118). “Unfortunately, this very promising period of Elisabeth Louise’s artistic tutelage lasted only about one year, as her father died on 9 May 1767” (Locker 119). Elisabeth Louise was encouraged to learn to paint by her mother (Locker 119). Later, her career “started to gain momentum around the middle of the 1770’s” (Locker 119). “By 1774 her growing recognition as well as her productivity had become a thorn in the side of the painters’ guild Academy of Saint Luke that controlled painting production in Paris, and her studio was seized for unauthorized practicing of the craft” (Locker 119). Two years later, she married an art dealer named Jean Baptiste Pierre Le Brun (Locker 119). Her husband helped to market her work (Locker). In 1776, Elisabeth Louise received her first royal commission and became one of Marie Antoinette’s most trusted painters (Locker). In 1783, her name was put forward for membership at Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture (Locker 120). Her admission was rejected, but “Eventually an order from Louis XVI, surely incited by his wife Marie Antoinette, overruled the officials of the Academy and Vigée Le Brun had against the efforts of her envious contemporaries—won back legal security and gained, as one of very few women, access to the most distinguished art institution in France” (Locker 120). Marie Antoinette was very supportive of Elisabeth Louis and helped her overcome many obstacles she faced (locker). “The recent exhibition *Vigée Le Brun. Woman Artist in Revolutionary France* at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (15 February – 15 May 2016) has put the focus on one of those miracle women artists ... Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun” (Locker 118). This article states “she was one of the rare women who got access as a member to the Académie Royale de Peinture et de

Sculpture (Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture) in Paris. Hence, her curriculum vitae exemplifies well that women artists could achieve much, but also that they had to constantly struggle to overcome obstacles that their male peers would never encounter” (Locker 118).

A more recent, historical example of women overcoming obstacles in the art world includes Lee Krasner. In an article from *The Washington Post*, Krasner talks about her student days in the 1930’s. In an interview from 1983, Lee Krasner stated “When I studied with Hans Hofmann he was very negative. But one day he stood before my easel and he gave me the first praise I had ever received as an artist from him. He said, ‘this is so good, you would never know it was done by a woman’ ” (Celebrating Women's Work). The fact that her work was praised for not resembling what Hans Hofmann thought women’s work looked like says a lot about the state of women in the art world at the time. Krasner was a pioneer of the Abstract Expressionist movement of the 1940’s and 50’s (Kernan). Despite her importance to this movement, she didn’t start gaining recognition in the art world until the 1980’s and later (Kernan). One possible reason for her lack of recognition could be that she was married to Jackson Pollock (Kernan). Her husband, being such an influential figure in the art world, potentially made it harder for her to be seen as an artist in her own right (Kernan).

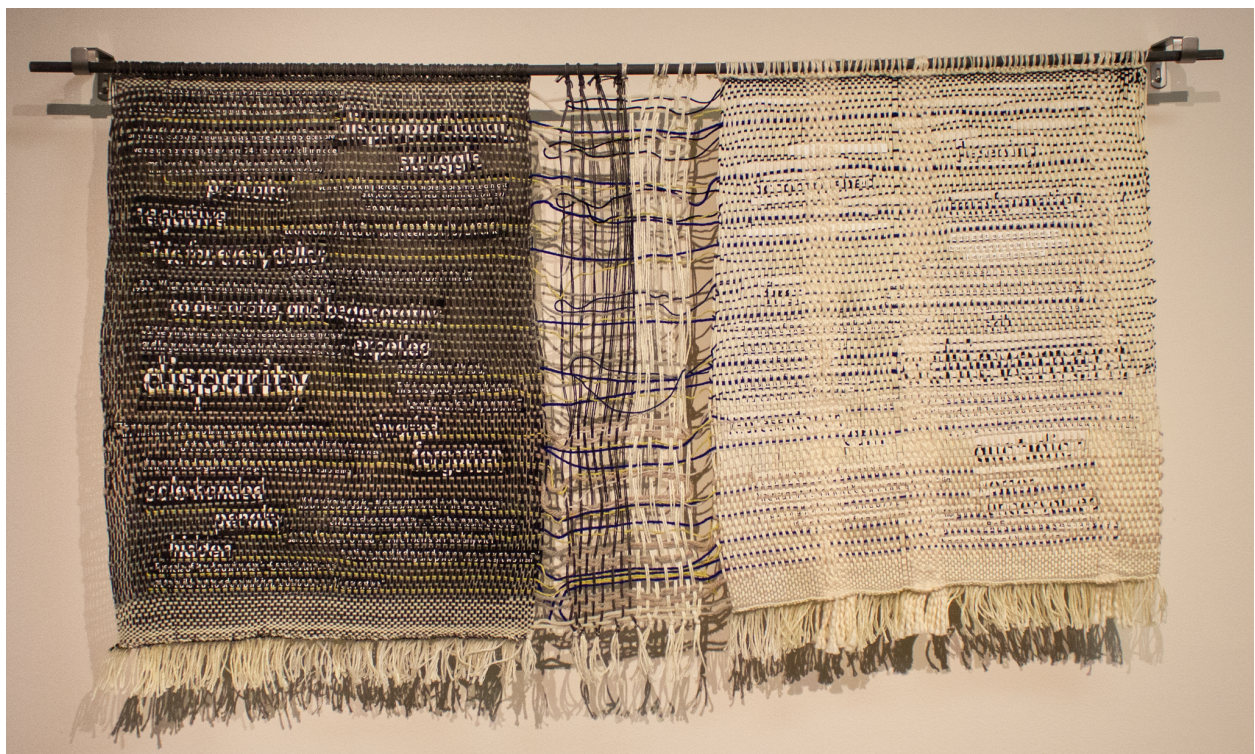
Like Krasner, Margaret Keane’s accomplishments were hidden, but not because her husband was a famous artist. Her accomplishments were hidden because her husband took credit for them. Margaret Keane’s “Big Eye” paintings rose to popularity in the 60’s (Parfrey 2). Her husband, Walter Keane, assumed the role of marketing and selling these works. Margaret’s paintings were reproduced as “lithographs, miniatures, collectible plates, greeting cards, and wall posters” (Parfrey 4). Walter Keane took full credit for the paintings created by Margaret and

worked hard to make sure no one discovered the secret. While Walter was attending parties, meeting celebrities, and living a lavish lifestyle, Margaret was “lurking in the background, and painting Keanes in a basement studio” (Parfrey 8). Years later, Margaret told a reporter from *The New York Times* that “I’d have to lock the door of the paint room” (Parfrey 85). She continues, “He wouldn’t allow anyone in. I was like a prisoner” (Parfrey 85). Margaret also opens up about the abuse and manipulation she endured from Walter. “After I filed for divorce, I painted a few paintings and mailed them to Walter. I was so afraid of him I thought if I kept mailing him then he wouldn’t have me killed” (Parfrey 104). She revealed her secret in 1970 that she was the creator of the paintings (Parfrey 110). The “Big Eye” paintings didn’t receive much support from critics (Parfrey). Some critics and academics found the paintings “formulaic and sickening in their sentimentality” (Parfrey 2). Despite this lack of support from critics, America fell in love with these paintings (Parfrey). In fact, some of the “Big Eye” originals sold for as much as a Jackson Pollock had sold for in 1954 (Parfrey 83). Margaret’s paintings were widely successful. Even after exposing her well-kept secret, she was eventually able to keep painting and develop her own personal style as an artist (Parfrey). Margaret’s story was well-documented, and even inspired a movie. I wonder, if these events had taken place even 50 years earlier, if her story would have ever been uncovered.

Project

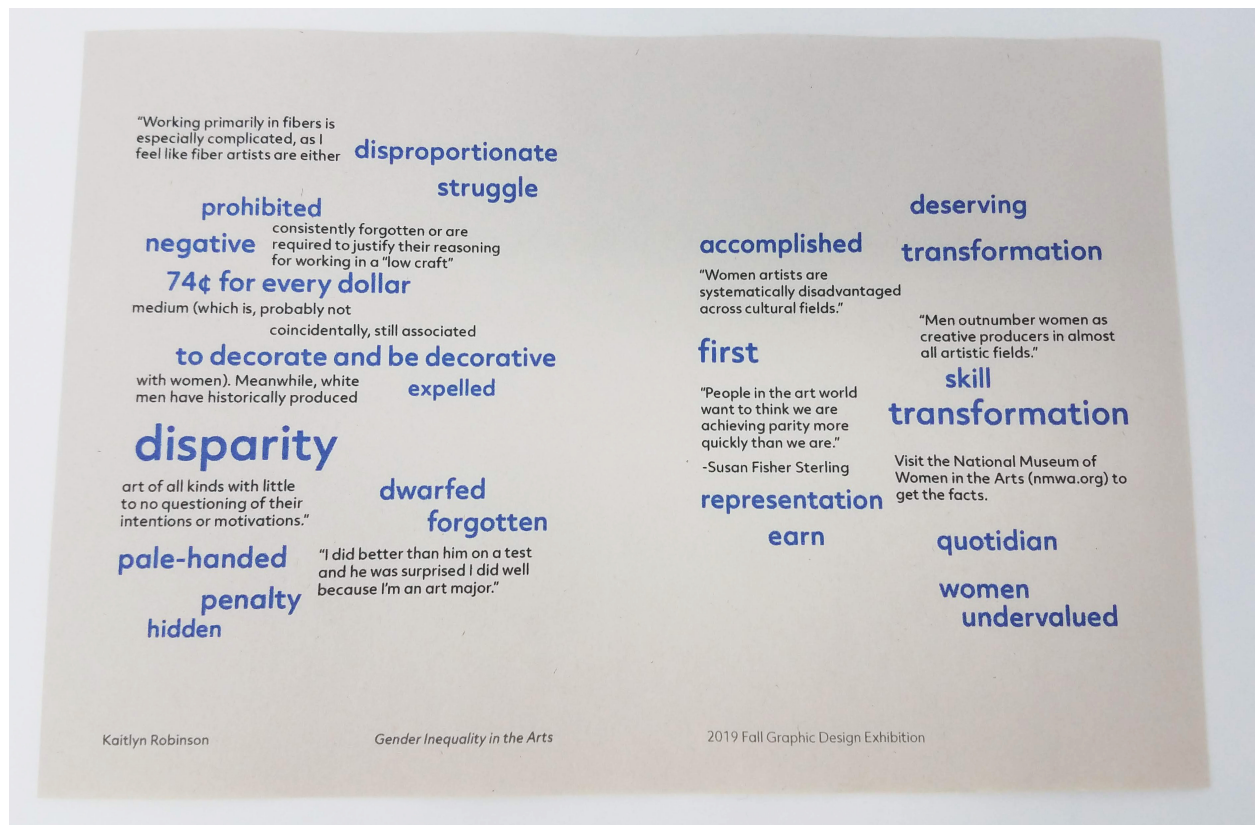
When looking into the history of weaving, I was surprised at how female-dominated this art form has been historically. Researching feminine art forms led me to uncovering the lack of inclusion of women in the art world. Using this research, I created a piece to educate viewers and start a conversation about gender inequality in the arts. The first component to this project is

a fabric piece created using the weaving process. My approach to this piece was to respond visually to the research I gathered. I wanted to use a traditionally feminine art form to discuss the inequality of women in art because feminine art forms, like weaving, have historically been devalued as “low art” or “craft.” This association with the weaving process is meant to help shed light on the issue of gender inequality. The piece is a large rectangle, roughly 29 inches tall by 50 inches wide. It is split into two sections that are loosely connected in the middle. I wanted to use typography in the piece because I felt it was a more digestible way to represent the research. The left section represents the opportunities that women have not had historically in the art world. This section includes mostly statistics and figures. The right section represents the achievements made by women in the art world that have gone unnoticed or unheard because of the lack of opportunity for women. The middle of the piece, where the two sections connect, represents this conversation that is happening between the two topics.



The woven piece.

I intended for this piece to be exhibited in the BFA Graphic Design Senior show of Fall 2019. So I wanted to also include another component with the woven piece to explain the research more in depth. This component began as a book, which I still produced, but the book didn't get exhibited. I wanted to give the viewer an opportunity to take some of the information with them, so the book wasn't a practical choice. It also would have been hard for viewers, in a gallery setting, to adequately read through the book and fully understand the research. So I designed a handout that viewers could take with them. This handout served as a map of the typography in the woven piece and also included new information with sources that the viewer could search online.



The printed handout.

The third and final component to the exhibition was a video of typography and quotes that was projected over top of the woven piece. The typography in the woven piece became hard to read and didn't relay my intended message the way I wanted it to. So the video served as another channel to get the message across to the viewer. I wanted to convey the idea of gender inequality in the arts within the video without strictly repeating the text that was incorporated in the woven piece. So I chose to include quotes that I gathered from my research and from interviews. Each quote appeared line by line on the right side of the piece. After each quote, a word appeared that related to the overall idea of the piece or to the previous quote. Some examples of the words that were used are disparity, achievement, deserving, and struggle. The length of the video is roughly four minutes. The video also served as a way to draw the viewer into the piece and hold the viewer's attention by making them wait for each line of text to appear.



The video projection playing over top of the woven piece

A way that I see this piece continuing is experimenting more with the video projection. There is a lot of potential to keep this piece evolving and changing by editing the video that is projected onto the woven fabric. The video can be added to and made longer as I talk to and interview more women about the subject or as I do more research. It could also be changed depending on where the piece is being exhibited. The quotes or words could be site specific so that it is more relatable and personal to the individuals viewing it. If this project continues to be exhibited, I could take reactions or feedback from viewers and use it to build onto the video for the next showing. I can also experiment with the placement of the projection. I could try projecting from the back side of the piece so that it is almost highlighting certain aspects of the fabric or use it as a way to guide the viewers eye around the piece in a narrative way. There could also be opportunities for the viewer to really interact with the projection somehow. Maybe the viewer has to interfere with the projection to see more detail in the fabric.

Another way to continue with this project could be to take what I learned during the weaving process and use it to create another piece, possibly using the same concept. I received some valuable feedback while creating and exhibiting the piece that can be used to inform future pieces. I could break my topic down and create a series of woven pieces. It could be interesting to think of ways to integrate the projection with a series instead of just one unit. I could create a series of small, woven swatches and use them like tiles. They could be rearranged to create new narratives depending on the place, time, or particular theme.

I want to take what I have learned about women throughout art history and use it to inform my future work. Even if I am not making work directly about this topic, I feel that this research will be influencing my work for years to come. Learning how hard women artists have

fought to gain the recognition we have today gives historical context to my work as I move forward and makes me want to make all the struggle worthwhile by creating work that will, in some way, no matter how small, enhance someone's life.

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